

'Hoffa': Overstating the Case

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Book World

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THE FALL AND RISE OF JIMMY HOFFA. By

Walter Sheridan.

(Saturday Review, 554 pp. \$10.95)

Jimmy Hoffa still has his fans in the Teamsters Union and some outside it. Hundreds of his boosters turned out for a lavish dinner in Cherry Hill, N.J., just the other day to honor the former union boss, ostensibly in recognition of all he had done before his imprisonment for jury tampering and pension fraud.

The \$25-a-plate testimonial was seen by some as the start of a movement to put Hoffa back in charge of the nation's biggest union. Sheridan says that as re-

cently as the spring of 1971, he told a U.S. Parole Board examiner who visited him at the federal penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pa., that he intended to take over again after his release.

The candid announcement did not sit well with the Parole Board, which turned down his application. Within a few months Hoffa was singing a different tune. He gave up any thought of running for another five-year term from his prison cell and bowed out as Teamsters president that

June in favor of his hand-picked regent, Frank Fitzsimmons.

Hoffa followed up by quitting his three Teamsters posts in the Midwest and promising, through his son, to confine himself to teaching and lecturing while living on his \$1.7 million lump-sum Teamsters pension. The assurances were enough to win Hoffa a rehearing, but in the end the Parole Board, apparently still skeptical, turned him down again. In what he called a "very carefully written

statement," Parole Board chairman George Reed said the board would wait another year and then take a thorough look at Hoffa's "relationship, if any, with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters."

The Parole Board never got another look. Two days before Christmas 1971, President Nixon commuted the gruff labor leader's 13-year sentence after he had served nearly five years. Still short of a pardon which restores all civil rights, the commutation prohibits Hoffa from "direct or indirect management of any labor organization prior to March 6, 1980."

However, Walter Sheridan, the chief investigator and charter member of the Justice Department's "Hoffa squad" under then Attorney

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Overstating the Case

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General Robert F. Kennedy, is convinced that Hoffa, now only 60, will get his foot back in the door long before 1980, even though he faces a battle with Fitzsimmons, who "has decided he liked his new power and respectability, and intends to keep them."

The restraints on Hoffa, Sheridan submits, will soon disappear, perhaps under a full presidential pardon. After all, Hoffa almost made it to Hanoi last fall to bargain for the release of American POWs; the gambit touched the top levels of the Nixon administration before faces turned red in a sudden splash of publicity. With Hoffa's supervision by parole officers scheduled to end next month, there is no telling what might happen. Once supervision is lifted, Sheridan reports, "officials at the Department of Justice acknowledge that there may be no way of enforcing the prohibition against union activity."

But some of Sheridan's assertions strain the imagination. For example, he writes that recent moves, "on the part of both the administration and Hoffa and his associates," to make a pardon publicly palatable leave "little question any longer of their conspiracy."

What moves? Well, first, Sheridan tells us, "a small group of attorneys in the Department of Justice was secretly designated to start laying the groundwork for a presidential pardon. Their mission is to attempt to por-

tray the Test Fleet Corp. case in Nashville as so unjust a prosecution that *"Hoffa could be said to have been justified in tampering with the jury."* (Emphasis supplied.)

The book is weighted down with such overstatements. In Sheridan's single-minded world, Bobby Kennedy was always good. Jimmy Hoffa is always bad, no matter what the day or what the page. Surely, Hoffa's villainy — which Sheridan convincingly chronicles — is not the entire key to his immense popularity among the two-million members of the union's rank and file.

Hoffa, we are told, is a "uniquely talented man" whose defenders claimed that he "had always ground out the best contracts possible for his members." Sheridan quite properly makes mincemeat of those claims, but without allowing that some of the contracts made Teamsters members very happy indeed. The wide-scale plundering of union funds, the payoffs, the sweetheart contracts, the bullyboy tactics and bribery offers that plagued honest Teamsters are laid out in persuasive detail.

But there are honest Teamsters who forgave Hoffa all that and more. Why? Did they simply enjoy the spectacle of his holding the government and the rest of society at bay, even at their own expense? Sheridan's book offers no real clues. He seems to count it a vice to give the devil his due.

On the other side of the coin, Sheridan maintains that Robert Kennedy's pursuit of Hoffa, both as chief counsel for the McClellan Committee and as Attorney General, was "not a vendetta."

For instance, Hoffa charged in the fall of 1961 that there were 29 grand juries around the country "out to get him." In refutation, we are told that there were really only 13.

With all the politicians and musclemen, Mafioso and businessmen on Hoffa's side, the crusade should probably have been more relentless. But it *was* a vendetta. Perhaps nothing else would have produced the jail terms Hoffa so richly deserved. And perhaps nothing else would have earned him the martyr's reputation he still enjoys among older Teamsters.

Sheridan, a former FBI agent, acknowledges no such niceties. The book is a monotone of corruption, so packed with undifferentiated detail that it inspires sleep instead of indignation. Which is a shame. Within the Teamsters Union, Sheridan points out, "nothing has really changed." Hoffa's convictions have not kept the Teamsters' pension fund from pouring millions of dollars into mob-controlled casinos. Embezzlers and gangsters still hold positions of influence. No union is more welcome at the Nixon White House. And all but the most determined reader will find himself responding with a yawn.